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John Brown drama a-moldering on stage

Summer is the time in which many states unfurl their historical pageants, those amphitheater-in-the-woods tableaux designed to give tourists a taste of culture and folklore. While few sightseers wander off the local trail to 14th Street, Source Theater is now presenting just such a show — high on American heritage and low on dramatic subtleties.

About the only thing missing from this production of Howard Roman's "The Holy Terrorist," a none-too-penetrating look at what made abolitionist John Brown tick, is the fireworks display that invariably concludes these evenings while the audience wends its way back to its campers. The Source production, which continues at the Warehouse Rep through the month, certainly tries for its own pyrotechnics with high-volume emoting calculated to reach customers in the far-off lawn seats. But it amounts to lots of sound and fury, signifying practically nothing.

John Brown, history tells us, was a ranting-and-raving religious extremist who believed in violence to gain attention for his anti-slavery position. Eventually hanged for leading a bloody insurrection near Harpers Ferry, W.Va., he became a martyr to his cause and actually may have hastened the emancipation of slaves.

If that is what we know from textbooks, you would hope that a play on the subject would go further or deeper, illuminating the "why's" behind the facts. "The Holy Terrorist," however, provides a wearying surface of hysterical rhetoric. Assuming we can agree from our 1980s vantage point that slavery was a dubious institution, we yearn for a more compelling message or insight.

The basic material seems to provide plenty of opportunity. What did motivate Brown beyond this messianic calling? What, beyond parental bullying, drove his sons to violence? What are the moral bounds of criminal activity in a just cause? Rather than tackling these, Mr. Roman sticks to the "You Are There" historical picture-

window approach, which is unsatisfactory and unsatisfying.

Nor has the playwright solved that perpetual problem in historical dramas of giving his characters a convincing way to talk. Just because these people leap out of history books does not mean that their every utterance should sound ready to be chiseled in stone. "You spurn me — you spurn my mission and you spurn my Lord," intones Brown to his sons at one point. Or perhaps it was Moses chastising the Israelites. Suffice it to say that Mr. Roman — a former analyst for the CIA — has not compensated for the play's thematic vacuum with writing style.

"The Holy Terrorist" won Source's first playwriting contest in 1981, and the theater has been trying to mount a full production ever since. This is no small feat since the script calls for 28 characters, here played by 23 actors.

It appears that Source is not content to set records for the greatest number of productions in a year, but also yearns to cram more actors on a stage than any other theater in town. Since nearly all of these performances are rudimentary at best, Source has put a new twist on its pursuit of quantity instead of quality.

Robert McNamara, an often capable director with smaller, kinkier modern plays, seems content to go the cardboard pageant route. Perhaps knowing that the script has nothing to say, he encourages his cast to shout loudly as a subterfuge. But just when we've turned our hearing aids down, Source artistic director Bart Whiteman (John Brown) opts for inaudible underplaying and intensely felt mumbling.

In an attempt to build a dramatic tension that the script cannot, Mr. McNamara opts for drum accompaniment to the action. For reasons not immediately obvious, he chose congas and bongos.

"The Holy Terrorist" at Source Theater's Warehouse Rep, 1835 14th St. NW, through June 29, \$9 to \$11, 462-1073.